

Similarities and Differences of W. E. B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey Political Ideas

Posted on August 24, 2019

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Introduction

W. E. B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey were major twentieth-century Black political thinkers who shared opposition to white supremacy but proposed different strategies for racial advancement. Du Bois was an American scholar, sociologist, writer, and organizer who helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and used research, journalism, protest, litigation, and Pan-African organizing to challenge segregation and disfranchisement. Garvey, born in Jamaica, founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League and built a mass movement centered on Black nationalism, economic self-reliance, cultural pride, and global African unity. Their disagreement was not simply a personality conflict. It reflected enduring questions about integration and autonomy, elite leadership and mass mobilization, interracial alliances and independent organization, and reform within existing institutions versus building separate institutions. National Archives and Library of Congress collections confirm both men's central roles in the period while also documenting the sharp rivalry between the UNIA and NAACP (National Archives, 2020; Library of Congress, n.d.). Comparing them reveals overlapping goals pursued through substantially different political theories and organizational styles.

Backgrounds and Conceptions of Leadership

Du Bois was born in Massachusetts in 1868, studied at Fisk and Harvard, continued study in Berlin, and became the first African American to earn a doctorate from Harvard. His academic training shaped a political style that placed considerable value on research, higher education, organized protest, and a leadership class capable of challenging racist institutions. His early "Talented Tenth" argument expressed the belief that advanced education could prepare teachers, professionals, writers, and organizers for community leadership, although the idea was later criticized for elitism and did not encompass the full range of Du Bois's evolving politics (Lewis, 1993). Garvey, born in Saint Ann's Bay, Jamaica, in 1887, developed his politics through printing, labor experience, travel in the Caribbean and Central America, time in London, and mass organizing. He spoke directly to workers, migrants, and people often excluded from elite institutions. The contrast influenced political method: Du Bois worked through scholarship, magazines, congresses, litigation, and reform organizations, while Garvey used rallies, uniforms, parades, newspapers, businesses, and popular symbolism to

create a mass movement (Ewing, 2014).

Integration, Black Nationalism, and Institutional Power

Du Bois generally insisted that African Americans possessed full claims to citizenship and should not surrender access to voting, education, law, or public institutions because white society practiced segregation. Through the NAACP and *The Crisis*, he supported legal challenges, anti-lynching activism, political participation, and interracial cooperation under conditions in which Black people retained their own political voice. Garvey was far more skeptical that integration could deliver genuine freedom in a society structured by racial hierarchy. His UNIA promoted Black-controlled institutions, commercial enterprise, racial pride, and an international nationalism summarized through slogans such as “Africa for the Africans.” The “Back-to-Africa” idea should not be reduced to a plan for every African American to leave immediately; Africa functioned for Garvey as a center of sovereignty, racial dignity, and global power (Garvey, 1986; Martin, 1976). His Black Star Line and related enterprises attempted to create commercial links across the [African diaspora](#). Financial and managerial failures damaged those projects, but their symbolic importance extended beyond their business performance.

Economics, Class, and Competing Organizational Strategies

Economic power mattered to both thinkers, although they defined the problem differently. Garvey emphasized entrepreneurship, Black-owned businesses, trade, and institution building because he believed political freedom would remain fragile without independent control of capital and employment. UNIA activity attracted many working-class supporters who encountered racial discrimination in labor markets, banking, housing, and commerce. Du Bois also studied poverty, labor, and economic exclusion and later became increasingly critical of capitalism, but his early public strategy placed greater emphasis on civil rights, education, political protest, and legal equality. Their class politics contributed to mutual distrust. Garvey accused established civil-rights leaders of elitism and dependence on white patronage, while Du Bois criticized Garvey’s administration, business claims, racial separatism, and political tactics. Garvey’s meetings with white segregationists, including Ku Klux Klan representatives, intensified the dispute: Garvey argued that openly separatist whites were more candid than liberal allies, while Du Bois and other critics regarded such contact as dangerous legitimization of white supremacy (Martin, 1976). The episode illustrates how strategic autonomy can produce alliances that other members of the same movement consider unacceptable.

Pan-Africanism and Global Black Politics

Despite their rivalry, Du Bois and Garvey both placed African-descended people within an international political framework rather than treating racial inequality as only a U.S. domestic question. Du Bois organized Pan-African congresses, opposed colonial rule, and used scholarship and diplomacy to connect African-American civil rights with anti-colonial struggles. Garvey built a popular Pan-African movement with branches and readers across the Americas, Caribbean, Africa, and Europe, using *Negro World* to circulate ideas of racial pride, economic independence, and African sovereignty (Ewing, 2014). Their Pan-Africanisms differed in tone and organization. Du Bois often worked through intellectual networks, formal conferences, and political delegations, while Garvey used mass membership, ceremony, entrepreneurship, and nationalist imagery. Both approaches helped broaden Black political imagination beyond national borders. They also demonstrated that Pan-Africanism contained internal disagreements about class, capitalism, colonialism, cultural unity, and political sovereignty. Later independence movements, civil-rights campaigns, Black nationalist organizations, and cultural movements drew selectively from both traditions rather than inheriting one unified doctrine.

Rivalry, Similarities, and Historical Legacies

The conflict between Du Bois and Garvey can obscure important similarities. Both rejected the idea that Black people should accept permanent political inferiority. Both built organizations, used journalism as a political tool, emphasized historical knowledge and racial dignity, and linked African-American life with a global Black community. Their differences concerned means as much as ends. Du Bois favored equal citizenship, legal challenge, advanced education, and alliances that could pressure existing institutions; Garvey prioritized mass nationalism, independent Black institutions, entrepreneurship, and a stronger separation from white-controlled structures. Neither thinker remained completely static across a long political career, and later movements recombined their ideas in ways neither could control. Civil-rights litigation and integrationist campaigns reflected aspects of Du Bois's approach, while Black Power, community control, Rastafari, and later forms of Black nationalism drew strongly from Garveyite themes. The National Archives notes Garvey's influence on Black nationalist and Pan-African movements, while archival records of Du Bois document his major role in the NAACP and international activism (National Archives, 2020). Their legacies are therefore competing and overlapping rather than mutually exclusive.

Conclusion

Du Bois and Garvey shared a determination to challenge racial domination while disagreeing about the institutions, alliances, and forms of power through which liberation should be pursued. Du Bois emphasized civil and political rights, higher education, research, litigation, journalism, and interracial

cooperation that did not require Black political silence. Garvey emphasized mass mobilization, Black nationalism, economic independence, popular symbolism, and international African unity. Their disagreements over integration, class, white allies, business organization, and leadership became intensely personal, but the strategic questions behind them remained larger than either man. Historical comparison should therefore avoid turning the pair into a contest with one correct answer. Their movements addressed different constituencies and exposed different weaknesses in American and global racial politics. Du Bois demonstrated the power of scholarship, legal equality, and institutional reform; Garvey demonstrated the mobilizing force of racial pride, self-organization, and transnational nationalism. Later movements repeatedly combined elements from both, showing that twentieth-century Black politics developed through debate among multiple visions of citizenship, autonomy, economic power, and Pan-African solidarity.

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